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Bernard Semmel (1928-2008)

Nothing that I write just now can do Bernard Semmel justice. Feelings of shock and loss weigh me down. Aside from deep depression at the demise of a true friend, my response to his death is that to the passing on of good people with outstanding minds and accomplishments: “What a loss for the battalions of intellect!”

I must have met Bernard in 1944, during my second year at C.C.N.Y. We both became history majors, were in some of the same classes together—or at different times—and met with perhaps a half dozen other students during lunch breaks or other opportunities for conversation. Occasionally a few of us arranged to meet during an evening or weekend.

Along with several other college friends, we went on to Columbia University, where Bernard took his Ph.D. degree with a dissertation in British history. I completed an M.A. degree in history, mainly American—and then switched to American and British literature.

At City College Bernard was especially impressed and, I believe, influenced by Professor J. Salwyn Schapiro, who had published an important study of Condorcet and was the author of a textbook *Modern and Contemporary European History*. Schapiro, a stalwart liberal, had to face down disrespectful verbal harassment by Stalinist students in his classes. Bernard, who was a firm anti-Communist, admired him greatly and visited him after Schapiro’s retirement.

After Bernard received his doctorate, he went to Park College, in Parkville, Missouri. I remember his telling me that he determined to leave after the dean—or some other administrator—made a disparaging remark about “those who seek notoriety through publishing.”

He and his wife, Maxine, went to England where, if I surmise correctly, he turned his dissertation into a book. Maxine found employment in or near London and helped him in his work. I remember his telling me—exactly when I don't recall—how fortunate he felt in his marriage. He expressed the same sentiment to me in different words several times later.

After I received my Ph.D., in 1959, I headed for Europe for a *wanderjahr*. Bernard didn't know that I had gone abroad. I surprised him in the British Museum at a desk loaded with books, and he invited me for dinner at his home.

While at Stony Brook, Bernard published book after book, most of them notable. Of his corpus of a dozen or so books, I will mention only three here: *Imperialism and Social Reform* (1960), *The Methodist Revolution* (1973), and *John Stuart Mill and the Pursuit of Virtue* (1984). I will leave it to scholars in his field to comment on the impact of his works.

Bernard was extremely well read. I am an incessant reader, but where I would have read one, two, or even three books by an author of mutual interest to us, he was likely to have read all of them. Yet he never played the game of one-upmanship. With him knowledge served nobler ends.

One matter that I can attest to is his great admiration for John Stuart Mill. I once said jokingly to him that I knew a language that Mill hadn't known—Yiddish! His puckish answer was: "I wouldn't bet on it." Nevertheless, he was critical on Mill. When I asked him whether Harriet Taylor was as intelligent as Mill in his *Autobiography* said she was, he thought for a few moments, then replied: "No." And when I spoke of Mill's non-sexual relationship with Harriet while her husband was alive, he asked: "How do you know it was non-sexual?" With Bernard there was no idolatry on any historical subject. His probing, along with his humor, could not have failed to energize students.

Bernard was kind enough to read manuscripts, stories, articles, and even a book or two of mine, and he always gave his candid opinion, whether flattering or flattening. I was thankful to learn from him, as I always did when we talked history. Yet I was even more thankful for his friendship. Although my career was at the University of Kansas, we managed to get together whenever I came to New York. When I was in Kansas, we had conversations by telephone, through early 2008—until they became too much of a strain on his voice.

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